

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. A method of operating a communications device, the  
2 method comprising:  
3       accessing a voice message system;  
4       retrieving, over a public telephone network, a  
5 voice message from the voice message system;  
6       generating a digital audio file representing  
7 said message; and  
8       sending, using at least one IP packet, the  
9 digital audio file representing said message to a service  
10 subscriber.

1 2. The method of claim 1, wherein sending the digital  
2 audio file includes sending an E-mail to the service  
3 subscriber with the generated audio file as a file  
4 attachment to said E-mail.

1 3. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of accessing  
2 a voice message system includes the steps of:  
3       contacting said voice message system by placing  
4 a call to said voice message system; and  
5       controlling said voice message system by  
6 transmitting at least one DTMF signal to said system.

1 4. The method of claim 3, wherein said at least one  
2 DTMF signal is a password which is required to be

3 supplied to said voice message system before messages can  
4 be retrieved.

1 5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
2 receiving a reply to said E-mail message; and  
3 deleting the retrieved message from said voice  
4 message system in response to receiving said reply.

1 6. The communication method of claim 5, further  
2 comprising:  
3 prior to sending said E-mail message, storing  
4 the retrieved voice message in a memory device from which  
5 the service subscriber can retrieve messages by  
6 telephone; and  
7 in response to receiving said reply, deleting  
8 the retrieved message from the memory device.

1 7. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
2 receiving an E-mail message including a  
3 telephone number and an audio file; and  
4 initiating a telephone call using said  
5 telephone number.

1 8. The method of claim 7, further comprising:  
2 monitoring to detect a speech signal followed  
3 by a period of silence; and  
4 upon detecting said period of silence, playing  
5 the audio file.

1 9. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
2 storing a first prompt message; and  
3 determining from subscriber input when the first  
4 prompt message should be loaded onto said voice message  
5 system.

1 10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:  
2 placing a call to said voice message system;  
3 and  
4 loading said answering voice message system  
5 with the first message.

1 11. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step  
2 of:  
3 determining from subscriber input when a second  
4 prompt message should be loaded onto said voice message  
5 system.

1 12. The method of claim 11, further comprising the step  
2 of:  
3 placing an additional call to said voice  
4 message system; and  
5 loading the second prompt message into said  
6 voice message system.

1 13. The method of claim 9, wherein the step of  
2 determining from subscriber input when the first prompt  
3 message should be loaded includes the step of:

4           accessing a prompt message schedule generated  
5           from subscriber input.

1       14. A method of controlling a voice message system,  
2       comprising:

3           receiving an E-mail message indicating that a  
4           voice message retrieved from said voice message system  
5           and forwarded to a service subscriber was reviewed;

6           in response to receiving said E-mail message,  
7           accessing said voice message system; and

8           controlling said voice message system to delete  
9           said retrieved voice message.

1       15. The method of claim 14, wherein the step of  
2       accessing said voice message system includes:

3           placing a telephone call to said voice message  
4           system over a telephone network; and

5           sending a control signal to said voice message  
6           system over said telephone network causing said retrieved  
7           voice message to be deleted from said voice message  
8           system.

1       16. The method of claim 15, wherein a voice message  
2       retrieval and forwarding device is used to place said  
3       call and to send said control signal, the method further  
4       comprising the step of:

5           in response to receiving said E-mail message,  
6           operating the voice message retrieval and forwarding  
7           device to delete a copy of the retrieved voice message

8 from a storage device included in the voice message  
9 retrieval and forwarding device.

1 17. The method of claim 15, further comprising the step  
2 of:

3 operating a subscriber computer system to  
4 automatically generate said E-mail message when a user of  
5 the subscriber computer system accesses an E-mail message  
6 which includes said retrieved message as an attached  
7 audio file.

1 18. A method of updating prompt messages on a plurality  
2 of voice message systems, comprising:

3 storing a plurality of prompt messages;  
4 receiving information from a user identifying a  
5 first one of said prompt messages and indicating that the  
6 first one of said prompt messages should be loaded onto a  
7 first remote voice message system;

8 accessing the first remote voice message  
9 system; and

10 controlling the first remote voice message  
11 system to store said first one of said prompt messages.

1 19. The method of claim 18,

2 wherein the step of accessing the first remote voice  
3 message system includes:

4 placing a call to said first remote voice  
5 message system; and

6            wherein the step of controlling the first  
7 remote voice message system includes:

8            transmitting a DTMF signal to the first remote  
9 voice message system.

1        20. The method of claim 19, wherein the information  
2 received from the user includes scheduling information  
3 indicating the time at which the first one of said prompt  
4 messages should be loaded onto the first remote voice  
5 message system and when a second one of said prompt  
6 messages should be loaded onto the first remote voice  
7 message system, the method further comprising:

8            accessing the first remote voice message system  
9 when the schedule indicates that the second one of said  
10 prompt messages should be loaded onto the first remote  
11 voice messaging system; and

12            controlling the first remote voice message  
13 system to store said second one of said prompt messages.

1        21. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step  
2 of:

3            receiving an E-mail message from said user  
4 including a prompt message as an attached audio file; and  
5            adding the prompt message in said attached  
6 audio file to said plurality of stored prompt messages.

1        22. The method of claim 18, wherein said step of  
2 receiving information from the user includes:

3            receiving said information from the Internet.

1 23. The method of claim 19, wherein the information  
2 received from the user includes information indicating  
3 when a second one of said prompt messages should be  
4 loaded onto a second remote voice messaging system, the  
5 method further comprising:

6       accessing the second remote voice message  
7 system when the information received from the user  
8 indicates that the second one of said prompt messages  
9 should be loaded onto the second remote voice messaging  
10 system; and

11       controlling the second remote voice message  
12 system to store said second one of said prompt messages.

1 24. A communication device, comprising:

2       means for accessing a voice message system;  
3       means for retrieving a voice message from the  
4 voice message system over a public telephone network;  
5       means for generating an E-mail message  
6 including the retrieved voice message as an attached  
7 audio file; and  
8       means for sending the E-mail message to a  
9 service subscriber.

1 25. A device for controlling a voice message system,  
2 comprising:

3       means for receiving an E-mail message  
4 indicating that a voice message retrieved from said voice  
5 message system and forwarded to a service subscriber was  
6 reviewed;

7 means for accessing said voice message system  
8 in response to receiving said E-mail message; and  
9 means for controlling said voice message system  
10 to delete said retrieved voice message.

1 26. An apparatus for updating prompt messages on a  
2 plurality of voice message systems, comprising:

3 a memory device including a plurality of stored  
4 prompt messages;

5 means for receiving information from a user,  
6 said information identifying one of said prompt messages  
7 stored in the memory and indicating that a particular one  
8 of said prompt messages should be loaded onto a remote  
9 voice message system;

10 means for accessing said remote voice message  
11 system; and

12 means for controlling said remote voice message  
13 system to store said particular one of said prompt  
14 messages.

1 27. The apparatus of claim 26, wherein the means for  
2 receiving information includes:

3 at least one of a modem and network interface  
4 card.

1 28. The apparatus of claim 26, wherein the means for  
2 accessing the first remote voice message system includes:

3 a DTMF signal generator.



1 29. A method of operating a communications device  
2 coupled to a plurality of voice messaging systems, which  
3 are physically distinct units from said communications  
4 device, and to a computer system corresponding to a user  
5 of the communications device, the method comprising the  
6 steps of:

7         accessing the plurality of voice message  
8 systems corresponding to the user;

9         retrieving voice messages from at least some of  
10 the plurality of voice message systems; and

11         forwarding the retrieved voice messages to said  
12 computer system using at least one IP packet per message.

1 30. The method of claim 29, wherein the step of  
2 forwarding the retrieved messages includes:

3         generating at least one digital file including  
4 audio data; and

5         transmitting said digital file to said computer  
6 system.

1 31. The method of claim 30, wherein transmitting said  
2 digital file to said computer system includes:

3         sending said digital file as an attachment to  
4 an E-mail.

1 32. The method of claim 30, wherein said plurality of  
2 voice message systems includes a first voice message  
3 system located at a first premises and a second voice

4 message system located at a second premises which is  
5 physically remote from said first premises.

1 33. The method of claim 32, wherein the step of  
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems  
3 includes:

4 initiating a telephone call to the first voice  
5 message system.

1 34. The method of claim 32, wherein the step of  
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems  
3 includes:

4 establishing a digital communication channel  
5 between said communications device and the second voice  
6 message system; and

7 sending at least one IP packet to said second  
8 voice message system to control said second voice message  
9 system.

1 35. The method of claim 34, wherein the step of  
2 accessing the plurality of remote voice message systems  
3 further includes:

4 initiating a telephone call to the first voice  
5 message system.